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ONE SEMESTER OF OLD FRENCH, A FOOT IN THE DOOR.

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FOR THOSE COLLEGES FACED WITH A CROWDED CURRICULUM, INFLEXIBLE MAJOR REQUIREMENTS, AND POORLY-PREPARED FRENCH STUDENTS, A ONE SEMESTER COURSE IN OLD FRENCH IS SUGGESTED. SUCH A COURSE WOULD FIT INTO A FLEXIBLE AND CONTINUOUS SEQUENCE OF CENTURY OR GENRE COURSES (WITH THE HASTY SURVEY COURSE ELIMINATED). COURSE OBJECTIVES SHOULD INCLUDE (1) COVERAGE OF FOUR CENTURIES IN A MANNER INTELLIGIBLE TO A LITERARY BEGINNER, (2) PREPARATION FOR GRADUATE COURSES IN OLD FRENCH AND PHILOLOGY, AND (3) JUSTIFICATION OF OLD FRENCH IN THE CURRICULUM ON CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL, AS WELL AS LITERARY, TERMS. A TEXT AND TWO INEXPENSIVE OLD FRENCH GRAMMARS ARE RECOMMENDED. THIS PAPER WAS DELIVERED AT THE CONFERENCE ON THE TEACHING OF OLD FRENCH AT THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION (NEW YORK, DECEMBER 28, 1966). (AF)

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ONE SEMESTER OF OLD FRENCH:
A Foot in the Door

While admiring the ambitious scope and high standards of the Old French programs discussed at last year's meeting, I was somewhat disturbed by an apparent gap between this, what seemed to me "ideal" and the real thing as I have come to know it. I can only assume that what may work wonderfully well in an "ivy-league" context, where students are selected and screened and where a good language background may usually be taken for granted, what may work well in this context would only prove traumatic to students in the college or university which is not permitted great selectivity of applicants. Experience has shown me that it is of doubtful value to introduce to the student who is unable to read Stendhal without the aid of glossary and footnotes, the full text of TRISTAN or the ROLAND and hope that he will appreciate it as literature while being obliged to decipher it line by line. This approach to Old French, undoubtedly justified in graduate courses, is by and large self-defeating on the undergraduate level, where our aim should be to encourage a feeling for and understanding of the beauty and the richness of Old French literature and thought, as well as an acquaintance with the language itself. Regardless of what we may feel about the anthology principle, we must ask ourselves honestly how many complete works could be read by beginners in one semester and what picture it will igive them of four centuries of Old French literature. Let me repeat that I have nothing against the two-semester Old French course directed toward the highly-motivated and well-prepared undergraduate who will be next year's graduate student. I would, however, like to take a closer look at the problems facing those of us who are trying to introduce and maintain a viable Old French course in a crowded curriculum with inflexible major requirements, faced by poorly-prepared students who must be given their share of attention, and offer what I consider to be an attractive and workable solution.

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I. The semi-literate French major: sad but frequently encountered is the case of the student entering his junior year poorly prepared to appreciate literature of any kind. Many states have such

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poor language training in their high schools that most freshmen, including those who have had some French, have to start off with an elementary course. After two years of basic instruction he may then decide to major in French with the goal of high-school teaching. In his junior year, he is exposed to the advanced composition and conversation courses, which he badly needs, and to a survey of French literature course, which I will say something about in a few minutes. If the student doubles up in his senior year, he may be able to "cover" two centuries of literature, and Old French will not usually be his choice. Since the teacher-training candidates make up the bulk of majors in our colleges, we cannot ignore them, or our Old French class would be empty and therefore expendable in the eyes of the administration. There is already enough administrative indifference to the value of undergraduate literature courses in a foreign language not to add to it by being too esoteric -- we are, after all, teaching a foreign language in a foreign language. The students in our class need to be confronted on their level, stimulated so that they may go on to stimulate others. If we are overly-selective, if we take the viewpoint that Old French is only for the chosen few we are denying its importance for the undergraduate curriculum and we are admitting what the administrators already suspect--that Old French should be relegated to the graduate school. Our subject must have a place in the metamorphosis of the non-literate student into an educated teacher with a good background in his field.

II. The crowded major program: Since most programs contain many pre-requisites to entrance into full-fledged literature courses, few foreign language students can take Old French before their junior or even senior year. While fulfilling a definite need, these composition, conversation, and culture and survey courses do not prepare a student for Old French any more than the average Freshman English course prepares a student for BEOWULF in the original.

In my estimation the chronological "survey course" is the worst offender, since the student's first, and often last, brush with literature is a race through eight centures of literary snippets, inevitably starting with the SERMENTS and including a scene from ROLAND. More often that not this will be his only

exposure to Old French literature. How much more satisfactory it would be to do away with this literary one-hundred yard dash and instead start the student in a flexible and continuous sequence of century or genre courses which would allow him to learn about at least four literary periods in a reasonably thorough fashion. Included, naturally, in this sequence would be a one-semester course of Old French.

A Program

Assuming that our one-semester Old French course goes into the schedule, we must devise a program that fulfills these functions:

1. Replaces the hasty glance of the survey course with a more substantial coverage of the medieval period as well as other periods. The course must therefore be open to the literary beginner, and the Old French course which will cover four centuries in a single semester must make use of the anthology principle.

2. The course should serve as a stepping-stone to graduate courses in Old French and Philology, since there will always be a few students in any institution who should be encouraged and prepared to continue their studies past the A.B.

3. Old French should be made an integral part of the major program, justified by its cultural and historical as well as literary importance. If it is not, then it may well be relegated to the "on demand" category.

Now the program I am proposing is quite simple, revolving as it does around a single textbook, one which from my experience has been able to fulfill the conditions I have tried to elucidate. This text-- Bogaert et Passeron, MOYEN AGE (Paris, Magnard), combines a clarity of presentation with a judicious and widely representative choice of selections. Passages of reasonable length are taken from good critical editions, offered in context with adequate aids to comprehension ranging from <u>traduction en face</u> for the difficult works to minimal lexical notes for the easier ones. Since most of the language difficulties are solved by the marginal glosses and notes, the student is left free to enjoy the original language without the tedious

and time-consuming task of constantly turning to the back of the book. Unlike the superficially similar Lagarde et Michard, MOYEN AGE, the Bogaert-Passeron book is written with a high standard of scholarship on a level quite suitable for a college course. There is more than ample material in the book for a one-semester course, allowing the instructor to pick and choose. The question now arises: can Old French be taught in this way? The answer depends on professor and student. With proper direction, the student can learn Old French structure and vocabulary in a relatively painless, gradual manner, as notes and translation thin out. With the aid of an inexpensive Old French grammar--either the Anglade or Reynaud de Lage, students can be asked to do simple phildogical analysès of certain passages. Some professors might concentrate on literary aspects by requiring explication de texte, preferring to leave linguistic study to another course.

Finally, I think we are all agreed on the desirability of Old French in the curriculum. The problem is how to fit our subject into the context of the over-all program. The university with a graduate program has undeniable advantage in being able to offer Old French on both undergraduate and graduate levels. But the course I have outlined, I think, makes the maximum use of the modest time available for literature in many colleges. Here the purpose is two-fold: literary coverage of an important period and a linguistic introduction to Old French, which, however sketchy, is more than most students will otherwise ever get.

Whatever approach is used with the text, the student will come away fromthe course with a good background for further study; he will have read a great variety of passages in their original dialects, and if this is to be his only exposure to medieval literature, at least he will know as much about this period as we would expect him to know about the Renaissance or the eighteenth century. Can we really demand more of the average undergraduate?

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